Return of Ishani

When I came to work for the first time among the Nagas, the year was 1955. There was no Nagaland then. The hills inhabited by the Nagas were known as Naga Hills District of Assam. The entire region, which we describe as the North-East India today, was then known as Assam barring the two princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Yet another entity was NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) which is now known as Arunachal Pradesh. NEFA too was treated as a part of Assam but its administration was under the direct charge of the Governor of Assam.

In 1955 Naga Hills District was already in ferment. An agitation was going on under the leadership of late A.Z.Phizo demanding sovereign status.

Within the first few weeks of my stay, I could see that the villages of Naga Hills, its form of self-government and the approach adopted by the erstwhile British regime was entirely different from most parts of the country. There was a lot of ignorance on the part of rest of the country about the Nagas. Similar was the case of the Nagas’ understanding about the rest of India. This circumstance was one of the major factors, which had led to unrest among the Nagas. This had perhaps led to fear and suspicion. After some years of working in Nagaland, I also came to know about other parts of the region. The events moved fast and within a few years after India became free, the state of Assam flowered into seven states popularly referred to as the seven sisters.

I am also reminded here of late Professor Emeritus of Gauhati University, Professor Venkata Rao. He had described once that in the entire world the northeast India with its diverse features was the only region of its kind. According to him, such a region did not exist anywhere else in the world. Northeast consists of varied ecological features. There are hills and there are plains. There is also the mighty river Brahmaputra and a few other major rivers. There are communities existing in different stages of civilization. The languages spoken in the region total up to 200 and more. The number of ethnic groups is also not small. The region also has the followers of the four major religions of the world: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. Besides these major religious groups, the different tribes of the northeast used to practice their own indigenous faiths. And in addition to the kaleidoscopic nature of the region, the communication facilities between the northeast and the rest of India was very poor then. So also was the case within the region itself. Inevitably much ignorance prevailed between the people of the northeast and the rest of the country.

In the March 2005 issue of Ishani, we had published an important account of the region prepared by the eminent Professor of Geography Prof. Mohd. Taher. It is a material of
permanent worth. We are reproducing it again in this issue to help us to perceive the complex and diverse nature of the region.

As one wedded to social service and the mission of generating goodwill, it became clear in my mind that a valuable service one can render is to correctly inform the rest of the country about special features of the region. At the same time it was also necessary that people of the northeast region are informed about the strength, the weaknesses and the diversity of the rest of India. I, therefore, kept thinking of starting an occasional newsletter to serve such an end.

Fortunately, a well wisher agreed to extend support, and we started a newsletter with the name Ishani. As time passed, many friends and well-wishers suggested that Ishani should become a regular journal and so the second incarnation of Ishani came into being on the 14th November, 2004. We succeeded in bringing out Ishani for one full year, i.e., till the September 2005 issue, as a bimonthly journal. But we ran short of funds. We managed to bring out one more issue, the November 2005 issue with the hope that we may succeed in mobilizing the required support. However, the timely support did not materialize and this situation led to a long break.

It is however heartening to note that the well wishers once again have come forward with help. We are now in a position to resume Ishani from January 2008. Hereafter, we will follow the calendar year as the year for Ishani also. It will continue to be a bi-monthly journal and as we had announced earlier, we will welcome a token subscription of Rs 100 per year from all those who would like to contribute.

Needless to say that Ishani was more a mission and not a commercial journal. We had decided right from the start that we will not hunt for advertisements. Such a journal can therefore mainly be sustained with the help of donation only, and we have maintained it mainly through donations so far.

As stated in the past, we would attempt to see that Ishani gradually evolves as a window to view the fascinating, bewildering mosaic that is the Northeast India.

**Late Ashok Saikia**

It was an unbelievable and deeply shocking news when my esteemed friend Sri Ravindra Upadhyaya told me over phone on the evening of the 30th December 2007, that our common friend, Ashok Saikia passed away at Delhi early that morning. His dead body arrived at his elder brother’s residence late in the evening. Many of his relatives, admirers, erstwhile colleagues including Ravindrabhai and myself were present. All of us paid our last respect, that evening. It was natural for Ravindrabhai to inform me as early as he could of this sad eventuality as both of us considered Ashok Saikia as a highly esteemed and dear friend.

Ravindrabhai’s association with him was longer than mine because his field of activities was Assam, whereas I have worked mostly in Nagaland. I, however, came in contact with Sri Ashok Saikia for the first time in Delhi nearly two decades back. Thus began our friendship, which grew stronger as the time passed.

Sri Ashok Saikia was a rare individual; outspoken, man of integrity, very efficient, kind-hearted friend and a conscientious citizen and human being. He remained a bureaucrat throughout his life, but he was a bureaucrat with a difference. He was an unorthodox bureaucrat if I may say so. The concern uppermost in his mind used to be to perform well, to do justice and to help the downtrodden and the needy.

We are carrying in this issue of Ishani two articles on him. One is by Sri Shantikam Hazarika who is at present the Director of Assam Institute of Management and late Saikia’s school days friend. The two remained in regular contact with each other even after they got busy with their own respective careers. Another is a write-up by Ira Pandey reproduced from the daily paper *The Indian Express* published from Delhi. It is a beautifully worded touching tribute to a man who was adored by many. Saikiaji’s death is more painful because all of us had looked
forward to his more active life after his retirement from the Asian Development Bank in August 2007.

We who work in the field of voluntary service will suffer the loss more. He had a special interest and soft corner in his heart for voluntary organizations and its workers. In fact another common friend had informed that after availing a few months rest Sri Ashok Saikia was looking forward to work with one of the national level voluntary service organizations. We in Nagaland Gandhi Ashram owe a special debt of gratitude to Ashok Saikia. He was a staunch well wisher, and an ardent supporter who frequently rendered precious help whenever we were faced with difficulties. He was also a highly cherished friend of the entire Thakkar family of Nagaland. I offer my humble tribute to the departed benefactor and a noble human being.

The month of January and this issue of Ishani

For us in India, the month of January happens to be one of the important months. The very mention of the month January brings to mind great sons of Mother India and also two most important historical events. It was on the 26th January, 1950 that India adopted a Constitution and declared herself a Republic. Since then, Republic Day is celebrated every year with due pomp, gaiety and colour. The month of January also carries painful memories of the assassination of the tallest man of the century, nay millennium, and the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi.

One also recalls that two outstanding sons of Mother India are associated with the month of January. The saint who stirred the consciousness of the country and gave a stirring call of awakening, Swami Vivekananda, was born on January 12. Realizing the importance of the day, it is now observed every year as National Youth Day. Yet another worthy son of India, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, was also born in January on the 23rd. One of the indelible contributions made by Netaji is the mantra of, ‘Jai Hind’ that he gave to the nation. This mantra has now been permanently etched on the minds of young and old. As the present issue of Ishani is being published in the month of January, we bow in salutation to these two great Indians. We are also carrying in this issue important write-ups on them.

To commemorate the Republic Day, we are reproducing the Preamble to Indian Constitution, which declares our resolve to constitute India into a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic and to usher in for all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. With this background, we are also reproducing a few paras describing the India of Mahatma Gandhi’s dreams. We are also carrying a thought-provoking article on Gandhi and Buddhism by Dr Naresh Mantri in our Gandhiana section.

January being the month of martyrdom of the Mahatma, we are reproducing two writings describing his complete surrender to God during his last days, and his faith in the name of the Lord or Ramanama in other words. We are also reproducing in Gujarati with translations in English and Sanskrit the now famous bhajan, “Vaishnava jana to te nay re kahiye.” Many are aware of this bhajan with its tune, but many are eager to know its full meaning. We are, therefore, reproducing an English translation by Gandhiji himself and another English version by the veteran journalist Khushwant Singh. There are two Sanskrit translations by two different translators. These are also being published under our Gandhiana section.

Gandhiana is the name we have chosen for a regular feature in Ishani which will carry some important material on Gandhi or by Gandhi and also about Gandhian thought and action. We propose to continue this feature in future also. In the current issue, we are carrying a report of an interview that the Ishani team had with a freedom fighter of Assam, Shri Kamakhya Prasad Das. He is one of the handful of surviving citizens of Assam who had the occasion to have a glimpse of Gandhi from near or far. Shri Das was fortunate in having an opportunity to briefly interact with the Mahatma. The younger generation in Assam may not
be aware that Gandhiji had visited Assam four times in his lifetime and taken keen interest in the well-being of the people. The younger generation in Assam and even in rest of India may also not be aware of individuals in the Northeast who had seen or met Gandhi. We have planned to meet as many such individuals as possible and collect from them their account of their darshan of the Mahatma and anything more they might have to share with us about their impression of Gandhiji.

One is also reminded of another significance of the month of January for India. The American Negro crusader Martin Luther King was the first and most important and successful leader in post-Gandhi era to employ non-violence. He used this ‘weapon’ successfully to earn rights for the Negro fellow men suffering from apartheid. He was also born in the month of January. We pay our humble tribute to this hero of non-violence.

It gives immense happiness to me to write introductory comments while resuming Ishani after a long break. Circumstances permitting and God willing, I look forward to a long mission of service through this journal Ishani. Finally, let me add that as a mark of repentance over long absence, we have tried to make this issue fairly large. I must confess it will not be possible to continue to bring out equally bulky issues every month. But then, we were keen to share all that we considered important on the Northeastern front.

NawaThakur